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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard
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"Saying it like it is!"

Well, we've made it through the first week of the new year! Things are getting back to some semblance of normalcy now that the holidays and all other celebrations are over. I happen to prefer "back to normal"; I guess that I'm a creature of habit, and not crazy about change and things that manage to move me too far off of my normal pattern of doing things.

As is typical, we spent a quiet night ringing in the new year. My wife was the early bird to retire, while I had a couple of drinks, listened to some music and played some video games that I had received over the holidays. Nice and quiet, more or less. I feel no more prosperous than I did in 2010, but perhaps that will come over the next year, or I happen to end up holding a winning lottery ticket! No, I don't live in Idaho or Washington - still not a millionaire the "easy" way!

I'm going to take it easy on you this week. No politics worth discussing. It's been a quiet, but busy week - and a long and tiring one. Yes, I'm still getting older and the energy levels are not what they used to be! So, I won't bother you with any New England weather reports (snow is coming!) or other potentially monotonous tales this week. Let's just dive right into this week's issue and relax!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
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Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, we made it through the first week of the new year, I guess. I hope all went well for you and yours, and that we can all look forward to a happy and healthy new year.

First of all, this column may look a little different to you this week. That's because the hard drive partition with my usual and preferred operating system (Linux) is all messed up and I have to use [gasp] WINDOWS! No, I'm not going to bash Windows... I'll let you do that. But I WILL say

that I just don't like it. I never have. Oh sure, I can appreciate the sheer size of the OS, the bells and whistles, the way it can take a super fast CPU with the fastest hard drive and RAM ever available to the general public and turn it into a Commodore VIC20 on heavy doses of cough syrup.

Oh, umm... errrr... uhhh... I guess I DID kind of bash Windows a bit, didn't I? Tough. Bill Gates can just deal with it. I doubt he'll lose very much sleep over anything that I have to say. EYE wouldn't if I were him.

Anyway, I'm not comfortable with Windows. I know how to 'use' it, how to wrangle the most of it, how to get rid of a lot of the bells and whistles and turn it into as lean and mean an OS as it's capable of. But it just doesn't 'feel' right. Know what I mean? It's like a... fake. Of course, if you're a longtime reader of this column, you know that I've never been a fan of Windows, Microsoft or Bill Gates, so it's really not surprising that I haven't changed my mind.

But there IS a reason (at least in my mind) for it all. The cost, the unwarranted complexity, the eternal resource drain... should I go on?

Oh, how about booting up? (Yeah, I'm starting up again) It was one thing when the best we had was a 6502C or 8088 processor, but c'mon, we're talking about fast machines now with huge amounts of memory and storage. Is there really any reason that loading and booting an operating system should take ten minutes on a machine that could compute pi to about a million digits in the same amount of time?

That's one of the things I always thought was cool about the ST and computers like the [ducking for cover] Commodore 64; when you turned them on, the OS was there, ready and waiting for you. That's one of the things that made me prefer those machines over "PCs". PCs had to load the OS from disk while 'my' machines had the OS in firmware. That gave me an advantage. Not only did I not have to wait for a slow floppy drive to load the operating system in, I didn't have to worry about that disk getting corrupted or erased or have coffee spilled on it. Yes, it's true that I had to deal with the lack of upgrade ability, but hell, that really didn't matter too much. I was happy with the OS the way it was.

But, to paraphrase Arlo Guthrie, that's not what I came to tell ya about. I came to talk about reality shows.

I've seen one or two commercials recently for these new reality shows coming out...

Now, there is no power on earth that could make me watch Snookie, and I don't care who the next top model is, but I do kind of like things like Last Comic Standing and America's Got Talent.

I like the talent shows for a couple of reasons. I mean, they do tend to throw a lot of people without a particular talent act like they DO have it. They know they're not good at what they're doing, but they either want the attention or just genuinely enjoy doing it anyway... like me. I couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, but I love to sing. Of course, I don't subject everyone in the country with a television to it, but that's neither here nor there. I enjoy singing even though I know I'm terrible at it. Okay, that's one of the reasons.

The other reason is that, once in a great while, these shows stumble upon something amazing. Terry Fader, the incredible ventriloquist, Susan Boyle from Britain's Got Talent, etc.

I was listening to the radio the other day, and a song I hadn't heard in a long time came on. It was "Drinkin' My Baby Goodbye" by Charlie Daniels. I've always liked that song. Aside from that, it put me in mind of one of these reality shows. There was a family musical group that I thought was really good. I don't remember their name now, but they were from Branson, Missouri and the group was all family. They each had their own specialty, be it guitar, fiddle, drums, piano, whatever.

The song they chose was Charlie Daniels' "The Devil Went Down To Georgia". They did a good job of it but, by the very nature of the song, the fiddle overpowered everything else.

If I remember correctly, they had a setup where you could email any of the contestants and encourage them. I really liked this group, and while I didn't know how much of a chance they had of winning with so many other music groups, I decided to email them anyway.

I told them that I thought they were quite talented, but that I thought there was a better song than "Devil Went Down To Georgia" to showcase their individual talents. That song was, of course, "Drinkin' My Baby Goodbye".

One of the women in the group replied quickly to me, thanking me for my 'advice', and saying that they would take it under consideration, but that they, being a family group, were very conscious of family values and didn't think that glamorizing alcoholism was.. the right way to go for them.

I thought about it for a while, decided not to reply, then decide TO reply. My reply to her was something like, "You're right, alcoholism isn't something to be taken lightly. Making a wager with the Unholy One is a much better way to go."

Oddly enough, I never heard back from her. [chuckle]

Well, that's it for this time around, friends. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

"Angry Birds" To Land on PlayStation 3 and PSP

Sony revealed on Monday that mobile phone game sensation 'Angry Birds' is heading for the Japanese entertainment giant's PlayStation 3 consoles and PSP handheld videogame devices.

The addictive puzzle game in which players catapult birds to smash through structures protecting egg-stealing green pigs has rocketed to popularity since being released by Finland-based Rovio Mobile in late 2009.

"Angry Birds" will feature 63 levels, Sony said in a PlayStation blog message listing games set for release in the coming week.

Sony did not indicate the price it would charge for "Angry Birds."

Atari Announces Atari Greatest Hits: Volume 2 Featuring Four-Player Multiplayer for the First Time

Atari, one of the world's most recognized publishers and producers of interactive entertainment, today announced Atari Greatest Hits: Volume 2, a follow up to the popular Atari Greatest Hits: Volume 1. Delivering 50 more of Atari's addictive games exclusively on the Nintendo DS family of hand-held systems, Atari Greatest Hits: Volume 2, brings together more of Atari's popular arcade and Atari 2600 titles including Star Raiders, Yars' Revenge, Millipede and Asteroids Deluxe and Major Havoc. These timeless gaming classics will hit retail shelves in North America in Spring 2011.

Atari introduced a new era of interactive entertainment throughout the 1970s and 1980s with its addictive arcade games and home gaming system. With Atari's Greatest Hits: Volume 2, each spotlighted game will feature the same pick-up and play control scheme as their original arcade and 2600 console form, with modern updates to align with the Nintendo DS platform. Up to four-player multiplayer via both DS Download and multi-card play will be available for 20 titles including Combat and Warlords for head-to-head gaming.

Additionally, Atari Greatest Hits: Volume 2 will feature a selection of interviews with Atari founder, Nolan Bushnell, an arcade gallery with arcade games and select arcade game memorabilia. As an added bonus, players can also try out the Atari 400 emulator using the Touch Screen keyboard.

"Given the positive response to Atari Greatest Hits: Volume 1, we look forward to offering gamers more of Atari's timeless classics in Atari Greatest Hits: Volume 2," said Jim Wilson, CEO of Atari. "By adding four player multiplayer to such classics as Warlords, we continue to offer players new levels of robust gameplay."

The complete Atari Greatest Hits: Volume 2 line-up is as follows:

Atari Arcade Hits

Asteroids Deluxe, Black Widow, Crystal Castles, Liberator, Major Havoc, Millipede, Red Baron, Super Breakout, Warlords.

Atari 2600 Favorites

Breakout, Crystal Castles, Millipede, Super Breakout, Video Pinball, Warlords, Return to Haunted House, Secret Quest, Canyon Bomber, Circus Atari, Combat, Combat Two, Demons to Diamonds, Desert Falcon, Off-the-Wall, Radar Lock, Golf, Double Dunk, Realsports Basketball, Realsports Soccer, Super Baseball, Super Football, Video Olympics, A Game of Concentration, Backgammon, Basic Programming, Brain Games, Code Breaker, Maze Craze, Video Chess, Black Jack, Casino, Fatal Run, Night Driver, Steeplechase, Street Racer, Quadrun, Sentinel, Space War, Star Raiders, Yars' Revenge

Developed by Atari in partnership with Code Mystics, Atari Greatest Hits: Vol. 2 will be available in Spring 2011. For more information, please log onto www.atari.com/agh2.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

CES Gadget Fest Sizzle Fizzles

Some 125,000 attendees descending on the annual tech gadget confab in Las Vegas this week can be forgiven for feeling as if they have traveled back in time.

Once the premier showcase of consumer technology's cutting edge, in recent years the Consumer Electronics Show has wallowed in the shadow of the one company that never attends: Apple Inc. The iPad maker famously snatched the spotlight from the show in 2007 when it unveiled the first iPhone at a rival convention. This year, the specter of a new iPad awaits.

Still, legions of executives, journalists and geeks will make the annual pilgrimage to the Nevada desert's glittering oasis to pore over what they did last year: fancier televisions and tablets.

"The more things change, the more they stay the same," said NPD analyst Stephen Baker. "We're in more of an incremental world than a monumental world, moving ahead a bit at a time."

Last year, a slew of electronic books and periodicals readers took center stage. Prototypes of more full-featured tablet devices were shown off, but companies were waiting to see how Apple would fare with the iPad, which was unveiled a few weeks after last year's CES.

The blockbuster sales of the iPad has inspired an explosion of me-too devices at this year's trade show. The tablet market is expected to surge to more than 50 million units in 2011, and analysts expect companies like Motorola Inc, Lenovo and Toshiba Corp, among many others,

to use CES to show off their iPad killers.

Longtime tech analyst Roger Kay of Endpoint Technologies said most companies are fearful of spending research dollars on a unproven market.

"Businesses by nature tend to be cautious, and they've been cautious this year; they're spending less. They're less willing to take chances than they were in 2007. But that has a downside," he said.

A procession of global technology chiefs declared 2010 as the year of 3D televisions, only to cut prices and retrench by the end of the year.

This week, they are expected to talk up Internet connectivity on the small screen and attempt to address the decade-old unfulfilled promise of connecting your television to Web shows and software stored in the cloud and on your personal computers.

Unlike tablets, the fight over the connected living room lacks a dominant player - or even a common method for delivering content. But it does not lack for aspirants.

"It's going to be the Wild West for a while," Baker said.

The battle will pit heavyweights including Samsung, Sony Corp and LG Electronics, but also companies like Google Inc, Netflix and Apple, all fighting to make their technology the standard.

Jason Oxman, senior vice president of the Consumer Electronics Association, the trade group that runs CES, said every TV maker is now looking to incorporate Web connectivity.

"TV manufacturers see the opportunity to provide that content built in. I think you'll be hard pressed to find a TV on the show floor that doesn't have these kind of apps built in," he said.

Products like tablets and connected TVs, which scarcely existed five years ago, now command outsized attention from heavyweights like Sony, Microsoft Corp, Intel Corp and Samsung Electronics, all of which will have a major presence at CES.

With a show floor of more than 1.5 million square feet, CES will feature the usual crush of gadgets: from cameras to home theater equipment to PCs.

Consumers are spending again on technology, following the contraction from the global financial crisis in 2008. The CEA expects consumer electronics revenue in the United States to rise 3 percent in 2010 to \$174.9 billion, and climb another 4 percent in 2011.

CES officially kicks off on Thursday, but the activity starts a day earlier, as product launches and keynotes begin.

The major keynotes at CES will include Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer, Verizon CEO Ivan Seidenberg, Ford Motor Co CEO Alan Mulally and Audi AG Chairman Rupert Stadler.

There will be particular interest in Ballmer's address, following reports that Microsoft will unveil a version of its software that runs for the first time on processors designed by UK-based ARM Holdings. ARM's chips dominate the tablet and handheld device market.

Verizon has said it would use CES as a platform to talk about its first phones for services based on Long Term Evolution (LTE), a technology standard with which Verizon is currently upgrading its network.

AT&T and T-Mobile USA are also expected to show off gadgets that run on faster data networks.

Asus Bets on Variety of Forms To Win Tablet Fans

Taiwan's AsusTek Computer Inc. plans to start selling an array of tablet computers - including hybrids that sit somewhere between a laptop and a tablet - with the hope that variety is the best weapon against Apple Inc.'s iPad and other similar gadgets.

Asus chairman Jonney Shih unveiled the new devices Tuesday ahead of the International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. They included the Eee Pad Transformer, which is a laptop that splits in two to function as a tablet, and the Eee Pad Slider, a tablet with a keyboard that slides out of its left side.

"We admire companies like Apple that offer great innovation, but they provide very limited choices for the customers," Shih said. "Different kinds of customers have different kinds of needs, and the best way to better serve them is to provide choice."

Asus, which essentially created the market for low-price netbooks with the 2007 launch of the Eee PC line, will need this strategy to pan out if consumers gravitate toward tablets as quickly as analysts expect. And Asus won't just be contending with the iPad: The company is just one of many big names expected to unveil tablets at CES.

Analysts believe the iPad will still account for the bulk of the 55 million tablets that Gartner Inc. expects will be shipped this year, but there's still room for rivals to vie for sales of the remaining 10 million to 15 million devices.

Asus hopes the Transformer and its other tablets will be among the winners. When using a full-sized keyboard docking station, the Transformer appears to be a black laptop, but once opened its screen detaches by sliding out of a slot on the keyboard's edge. The device's touch-screen will measure 10.1 inches diagonally and is half an inch thick.

Shih said the Transformer will run the upcoming Honeycomb version of Google Inc.'s Android software, which will be more geared toward tablets than the current version for smart phones. It will get up to 16 hours of battery life and include an Nvidia Tegra 2 dual-core processor. The Transformer is set to begin selling in April for \$399 to \$699, depending on its configuration. Asus has not said how much memory it will include.

The Slider will have the same hardware features as the Transformer - including the same processor, 10.1-inch screen, and Android operating software - but its keyboard won't be detachable. The Slider, which will be 0.7 inches thick, is scheduled to be sold starting in May for between \$499 and \$799. Shih did not say how much built-in memory it will have.

Shih presented two other tablets as well: The Eee Slate, which appeared to

be the same tablet he showed at the Computex Show in Taiwan last year, and the Eee Pad MeMO.

The Slate, which will run Microsoft Corp.'s regular PC operating software, Windows 7, will come with a 12.1-inch touch screen that has 1280-by-800-pixel resolution. It will include a 34-gigabyte or 64-gigabyte hard drive and a more powerful Intel Core i5 dual-core processor.

The MeMO will have a 7-inch touch screen and a Qualcomm Snapdragon processor. It will run the Honeycomb version of Android.

The Slate will cost \$999 to \$1,099 and be available this month, while the MeMO is set to be sold for \$499 to \$699 in June.

All the upcoming tablets will include the ability to play high-definition video. All but the Slate will have cameras on the front and back for taking photos and video chatting; the Slate will have one camera on its face.

Microsoft's Answer to the iPad Is Still in Pieces

Instead of unveiling an elegant response to the iPad, Microsoft came to the tech industry's premier gadget show with a collection of exposed computer guts.

Microsoft's biggest news was that the next version of Windows would run on the style of cell phone chips that power the iPad and other tablets today. It proved it with a series of demonstrations on half-built computers; on the monitors hooked up to those machines, the software was indistinguishable from the current Windows 7.

Microsoft's missing tablet served as a reminder that the world's largest software maker remains years from a serious entry into this new category of devices. It also raised more doubts about whether Microsoft Corp. will ever be able to grab a meaningful piece of this fast-growing segment. If it can't, Microsoft Corp.'s dominance of personal computers may become increasingly irrelevant as people embrace ever-sleeker portable devices.

CEO Steve Ballmer mostly lingered on what went right last year when he gave the company's customary keynote on the eve of the International Consumer Electronics Show on Wednesday. He had his share to boast about. Xbox 360 and the Kinect motion-sensing controller that's racked up more than \$1 billion in sales in just two months, a ground-up overhaul of the Windows smart-phone software and rapid adoption of Windows 7 on PCs are all legitimate successes.

Still, it's hard for anyone to applaud Microsoft without noting the threats posed by the growing popularity of Apple Inc.'s iPad. It's also hard to see Windows as a tablet contender amid an onslaught of new tablets running Google Inc.'s Android software, which has already helped turn mobile phones into mini-computers.

Those concerns have been weighing on Microsoft stock, which has hovered around the \$20 to \$30 range for the past decade. Apple, on the other hand, has seen its share price more than triple since the first iPhone was announced in early 2007. Last year, Apple's market capitalization

surpassed Microsoft's, making Apple the second-largest U.S. public company after Exxon Mobil Corp.

Microsoft has not been absent from the tablet discussion - Windows tablets have been around for years, but the devices never caught on with the mainstream. At last year's gadget show, Ballmer demonstrated a sleek "slate" from Hewlett-Packard Co. that runs Windows 7, and today there are several iPad-esque tablets that use Microsoft's operating system.

But those gadgets have none of the iPad's cachet, and Microsoft has done little to market them. And it's the upcoming Honeycomb version of Android, Google's first to be designed specifically for tablets, that is seen as the best shot to challenge Apple.

Many analysts and design experts say Windows 7 is doomed to fail as a tablet system because it was created with the keyboard and mouse in mind. At best, said technology industry analyst Rob Enderle, Windows 7 tablets are a stopgap measure while Microsoft pushes ahead on what will likely be called Windows 8.

Microsoft declined to make Ballmer available for an interview Thursday. Given the rudimentary proof-of-concept work Microsoft demonstrated Wednesday, and the difficulty of the task of building a multi-platform operating system, analysts don't expect a new Windows to arrive for at least another two years. Microsoft moved late in part because it didn't take tablets seriously.

"Remember, we just had the netbook scare," Enderle said in an interview. Netbooks, a class of cheap, under-powered laptops that at first ran versions of the free, open-source Linux operating system, were heralded as the end to Windows' domination. But Windows soon edged out Linux on netbooks; shortly thereafter, consumers realized the devices weren't good for such tasks as watching online video. The phase passed so quickly that when the industry moved on to tablets, Microsoft expected to see the same progression, Enderle said.

The factor Microsoft apparently failed to take into consideration was Apple, which scoffed at netbooks but took the tablet very seriously. When the iPad launched, Apple's design and marketing savvy tipped tablets into the mainstream.

"Now, they recognize that they've got a problem," Enderle said.

In the near term, worrying about Microsoft crumbling at Apple's feet seems overblown despite its stagnant stock. After all, the software maker has for years handily fended off challenges to its cash cows, Windows and Office, from the likes of Google and Apple.

The company, with more than \$40 billion in cash on its balance sheet, can afford to slog from behind in areas such as search and smart phones. Its earnings rose 29 percent and revenue grew 7 percent in its last fiscal year that ended in June, while most other companies were foundering in the global recession.

Microsoft's dividends are generous and steady. Ballmer frequently draws criticism from the media but wins high praise from analysts and large shareholders for delivering quarter after quarter of strong results that just about any other CEO would envy.

But some analysts fear that missing the tablet boat might make a lethal

crack in Microsoft's complete dominance in the PC market.

Wells Fargo Securities analyst Jason Maynard said he worries that even though Microsoft still generates the bulk of its wealth from corporate spending on technology, consumers are starting to have more sway in deciding the kinds of devices that make it into the workplace.

This trend, Maynard said, could become the "Trojan horse" that Apple needs to increase Mac sales to businesses, or that Google needs to chip away at Microsoft's hold on e-mail and desktop software.

When Microsoft changes direction, it must weigh the affect its moves will have on more than a billion Windows PC users. Roger Kay, founder of the research group Endpoint Technologies Associates, said this hobbled Microsoft's tablet planning. It can't afford to repeat the pattern when the next hot device trend lands.

"It's clear Microsoft has to become more nimble," Kay said. "It may be able to recover from this tablet debacle, but this won't do for business as usual."

OLPC Cuts Price, Power Use of XO 1.75 Laptop

One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) showed off the next version of its famous laptops on Thursday at the International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, saying the new price-per laptop has been reduced to US\$165 each and power consumption has been slashed by half compared to the previous version.

The XO-1.75, with its 8.9-inch touchscreen, will start shipping in the second quarter of this year to countries around the world trying to bring schoolchildren into the computer age. OLPC was formed by professors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to develop a low-cost laptop for kids in poor countries to help make sure nobody is left behind in the computer age.

"The biggest obstacle has been power. We are pretty excited about getting a lower power laptop out there," said Edward McNierney, chief technology officer of OLPC, at a booth at CES.

The XO-1.75 is the first OLPC laptop to use chips based on processor technology from Arm Holdings, which has been a huge factor in reducing power on the laptop, McNierney said. The previous XO used an x86-based microprocessor, the kind made by Intel, Advanced Micro Devices (AMD) and Via Technologies.

Using Arm-based chips halved power consumption to just 2-watts, he said.

The upcoming OLPC tablet, the XO-3, will come out in 2012 and use just 1-watt of power, he said.

The XO-1.75 laptop uses an 1GHz Armada 610 chip from Marvell Technology with Arm processing technology on board.

The new laptop takes a major step into the tablet-era for OLPC, McNierney said. The group put the entire motherboard, which holds the chips and other components, behind the laptop screen, leaving the other half of the laptop

for the keyboard and battery. The move simplifies the design so the next step can do away with the bottom half and end up with a tablet.

The XO-3 tablet will have the same screen size as Apple's iPad, 9.7-inches, McNierney said.

"It's gotta be a full-sized device," he said.

OLPC also plans to make a cover to protect the tablet's screen. OLPC could put a soft, flat keyboard on the cover for easy typing and use a solar panel to solve the power issue.

OLPC has learned from experience that finding electricity is the main problem in getting the XO laptops to kids in developing countries. Many areas lack electricity, making it hard to recharge laptops. The group has come up with a number of novel ways to recharge the laptop's batteries.

McNierney recharged the XO-1.75 with a hand crank. It takes 1 hour and 47 minutes to fully recharge the battery by hand, he said.

The battery is made with lithium ferrous phosphate, which he said is safer than the lithium ion. The OLPC batteries are designed to last for five years and slow-recharging is one way to extend the life of the battery, he said.

Always Connected Lifestyle on Display at CES

Smarter devices, homes and cars for the always connected lifestyle are taking center stage as the annual Consumer Electronics Show kicks off here on Thursday.

Slick new smartphones, ultra-thin laptops, tablet computers to rival Apple's iPad and Web-connected and 3D television sets are expected to grab the most attention during the four-day event at the Las Vegas Convention Center.

But the show floor will also feature more smart home appliances such as ovens which can download recipes and vehicles which give drivers hands-free voice control access to their smartphone applications.

Technology titans such as Cisco, Intel, LG Electronics, Microsoft, Motorola, Panasonic, Samsung, Sony and Toshiba were among the firms offering a glimpse of their upcoming products to reporters here ahead of the official CES opening.

Motorola Mobility and LG Electronics both announced plans to launch touchscreen tablet computers this year powered by "Honeycomb," the latest version of Google's Android software optimized for tablets.

Motorola Mobility said its tablet, the Xoom, which features a screen about the same size as the iPad, will be in stores by the end of March while LG Electronics said its G-Slate is expected to be available in the coming months.

More than 100 tablets are expected to be announced at CES as manufacturers around the world attempt to carve out a share of a market

which technology research firm Gartner estimates will see sales of 55 million units in 2011.

As for market leader Apple, the California-based maker of the iPod, iPhone and iPad is once again shunning CES.

Motorola Mobility was also one of a number of companies showing off their latest smartphones including devices designed to work on Verizon's 4G network, which boasts mobile Internet speeds up to 10 times faster than 3G.

Internet-enabled televisions are also in abundance as manufacturers seek to merge the Web with the traditional television viewing experience.

"The next big transformation is on us; the marriage between television sets and the Internet," Sony chief executive Sir Howard Stringer said. "It is clear that consumers are ready for it."

The Consumer Electronics Association (CEA), which brings together the 2,600 exhibitors expected at CES this year, has forecast that more than half of all TV sets sold in 2014 will be Internet enabled.

As for 3D TV, which has met with a fairly unenthusiastic response from consumers so far, Sony is among the companies rolling out new 3D models, betting that the future of home entertainment is in 3D.

David Steel, executive vice president for Samsung Electronics North America, said more than one million 3D TV sets were sold in the United States last year with Samsung taking a 70 percent market share.

"We're making a big investment in 3D and we're very optimistic about its future," Steel said.

As for the home, CEA chief economist Shawn Dubravac said the average US household has 24 technology products - and they are getting smarter all the time, from ovens to dishwashers to refrigerators to floor-cleaning robots.

Sanjay Jha, the chief executive of Motorola Mobility, said the smartphone is emerging as the device at the "center of our digital lives" allowing people to "connect with home while on the road."

"Smart access will allow us to control and monitor home appliances with a smartphone," Jha said.

Twitter for Mac Debuts

Twitter has launched Twitter for Mac, a desktop application for Apple computers. The company announced in a blog post that the application is debuting in conjunction with the new Mac App Store, which went live on Wednesday.

"This app gives Twitter users another fast and convenient way to stay connected to what they care about most," Twitter's Carolyn Penner wrote. "Tweets appear in real-time (using our streaming API), and the app auto-shortens URLs and has lots of useful keyboard shortcuts."

Penner said that the new app is "three times faster than its original version," which was called Tweetie for Mac. The previous version was created by atebits, a company Twitter acquired in April.

"We acquired atebits with a focus on launching our own Twitter iPhone application," Penner added. "Since, then, we've been asked repeatedly for a new version of Tweetie for Mac. We decided that the new version fits well into our goal of ensuring that mainstream users will have the best possible experience on all platforms."

Launched in July 2006, Twitter now has more than 175 million registered users. But most of its growth was achieved over the past two years. According to a recent study from social media analytics company Sysomos, 95 percent of Twitter handles have been created since January 2009.

Prior to that time, Twitter's growth had been relatively steady, albeit slow.

Sysomos also said that Twitter users have gotten more comfortable with sharing personal information since 2009. In the past two years, the number of users that have published a bio on the micro-blogging site has surged from 31 percent to 69 percent.

Despite these findings, Pew recently said that only 8 percent of Web users in the U.S. are on Twitter.

First announced at Apple's Back to the Mac event in October, the Mac App Store was launched Wednesday with more than 1,000 apps.

Microsoft Says Lost Hotmail E-mails Now Restored

Microsoft Corp. said Monday that it has resolved a glitch that caused thousands of Hotmail users to temporarily lose all of their e-mails.

A chorus of frantic people had posted complaints to the Redmond, Wash.-based company's online message board over the weekend, saying their e-mails had disappeared. In some cases, e-mails were mistakenly sent to their deleted mail folders.

Chris Jones, senior vice president of Microsoft's Windows Live business, said in a blog post Monday that 17,355 people lost their e-mails starting on Thursday. By Sunday evening, the messages had been restored.

Though his team has identified what went wrong, Jones did not disclose any details.

"As with all incidents like this, we will fully investigate the cause and will take steps to prevent this from happening again," he wrote.

Hotmail is the world's most popular free Web-based e-mail service, with about 360 million users, according to Web traffic measurement group comScore Inc.

The online Hotmail message board has racked up 492 pages of complaints about lost and deleted e-mails dating back to early November.

Kaspersky Customers Should Renew Carefully

Magazines really hate it when you let your subscription lapse. The time between receiving your first issue and receiving your first renewal notice can be amazingly short. If you like the magazine that's not a problem; you can renew any time and simply extend your subscription. Not all security software subscriptions work the same way, though. In particular, if you renew your Kaspersky subscription too early you can incur a significant loss.

An irate customer brought this problem to my attention. He got a notice that his Kaspersky Internet Security 2011 was about to expire, so he extended the subscription for two years. Being a person of rare perception he noticed that the new end date was two years from the present, not two years from the previous end date. He lost two full months of coverage.

I checked with Kaspersky and was very surprised to find that indeed this is their policy. If you renew in the two weeks prior to the end of the current subscription you'll retain the remaining two weeks. But if you renew sooner you simply lose the remainder of the current subscription.

According to my Kaspersky contacts a warning about this policy should have come up when the reader tried early renewal. According to the customer no such warning appeared. I tend to believe the customer, who was sharp enough to notice the discrepancy in end dates.

If you're a happy user of a Kaspersky security product you'll certainly want to keep your subscription current. Just be very careful not to renew too early!

Firefox Becomes Most-used Browser in Europe

Firefox was the most-used browser in Europe in December, edging out Microsoft's Internet Explorer for the first time, according to new data released by the Web analytics service StatCounter on Tuesday.

The open-source Web browser held a 38.11 percent market share in Europe, while IE had a 37.52 percent share, according to StatCounter. The company compiles its statistics from its tracking code, which it says is used on more than 3 million websites worldwide that receive about 15 billion hits monthly.

Firefox may have secured the top position due to the strong gains made by Google's Chrome browser in Europe, according to StatCounter. Chrome had a 14.58 percent market share in December, up from 5.06 percent for the same month a year earlier.

Another contributing factor to IE's decline may have been the European Commission's antitrust settlement with Microsoft that resulted in consumers being given a clearer choice when selecting a default Web browser, StatCounter said.

Microsoft and the Commission reached an agreement in October 2009 that dictated that Windows users be presented with a ballot screen in which they can change from Internet Explorer to one of 11 other browsers.

Microsoft is required to continue to present the ballot screen for about four more years.

But IE is still on top in North America, where it holds a 48.92 percent share. In that region, Firefox had a 26.7 percent share, with Chrome at 12.82 percent followed by Safari at 10.16 percent, StatCounter said.

Downloads To Recover Your Files and Save Your Bacon

Losing important files - whether they're business documents, precious photos, or even favorite videos or songs - is certainly distressing. The data isn't necessarily gone forever, though. Whether you've deleted files accidentally or lost your entire drive to a crash or a disaster, you can try to retrieve the data with help from the following utilities.

Recuva (free, donationware), which is stylish and easy to use. It's also available in a portable version. In addition, Recuva offers sector-based recovery.

What is sector-based recovery? When a hard drive crashes, or a PC produces error messages, or you can't boot into the operating system, you need something stronger than a mere undelete utility. If the crashed drive shows up in the Windows Disk Management console, and is still spinning and not making funny noises, you may be able to retrieve your data with one of the sector-based utilities below. It will probably cost you, though: All of these free demos will show you what they can recover, but you'll have to pay to get more than a minimal amount of data back.

Note: Never install a sector-based recovery utility on the hard drive or partition from which you're trying to recover data. You might overwrite the data.

Easeus Data Recovery Wizard (\$70; free demo). The demo version will recover a single file for you - no matter the size. Data Recovery Wizard is also arguably the easiest recovery program to use, as it walks you step-by-step through the process.

R-Studio (\$80; free demo) has been my go-to recovery application for years because it works with every file system out there, including Linux and Mac. The interface and approach are a bit technical, but R-Studio does the job if the job can be done. The demo comes with its own boot CD in case you need to recover from a machine that can't boot to its OS; I always try to attach the ailing drive to another computer since Windows-based recovery is faster, but it's a nice feature. The demo recovers files of 64KB or smaller.

Active File Recovery Standard (\$35; free demo) makes it a tad easier to see what's recovered than R-Studio. Also, it's relatively inexpensive, and the demo recovers files up to 64KB. Companion product Active Partition Recovery (\$40; free demo) has also delivered good results. In many cases, by restoring a partition you'll be able to boot to the OS again - and if not, you'll at least be able to use standard file-copy methods to recover your data. For the latter, you'll probably have to boot from a CD; any version of Linux that will run from a CD, such as Slax or Ubuntu, is suitable and free.

Active File Recovery Professional (\$45; free demo) combines both file recovery and partition recovery. Hint: Buy Professional unless you need a boot CD, in which case the Enterprise version (\$100; free demo), which comes with a Windows 7-based boot CD, is appropriate. Again, the demo can recover files up to 64KB.

Other recovery utilities are out there, including the very pricey EasyRecovery (\$200; free 30-day trial) from Ontrack, which I've used effectively as well; its demo can recover a single file. But the programs I've discussed above have worked for me consistently over the years. It doesn't pay to mess around or to try to cheap it out when your drive might be dying even as you recover data - so don't risk it.

That said, in my tests the sector-based recovery in the latest iteration of Recuva worked fine with IDE drives (though not SCSI). If you're sure that hard-drive failure isn't imminent - it can be when you start seeing errors - give Recuva a shot.

SEC Rule Likely To Trigger Facebook IPO in 2012

With so many investors becoming fans of the company, Facebook will be legally required to begin sharing more information about its finances and strategy by April 2012, according to documents distributed to prospective shareholders.

Some of the numbers that began trickling out Thursday were eye-popping - most notably a net profit margin of nearly 30 percent, much higher than most people had previously speculated.

The owner of the world's largest Internet social network, privately held since it started in a Harvard University dorm room seven years ago, will be forced to open its books because it expects to have more than 500 shareholders at some point this year, according to a person who has reviewed the documents handed out Thursday. The person asked not to be identified because the documents are only being given to an elite group selected to buy a stake in Facebook through a fund packaged by the company's newest investor, Goldman Sachs Group Inc.

Surpassing 500 shareholders will catapult Facebook over a hurdle likely to lead to the company's long-awaited initial public offering of stock next year.

After a company with at least \$10 million in assets has more than 500 shareholders, the Securities and Exchange Commission requires it to disclose its financial results and other details on a quarterly basis in an effort to ensure investors are adequately informed. The reporting requirement kicks in 120 days after the fiscal year in which a company exceeds the shareholder threshold for the first time.

Facebook's fiscal year ends Dec. 31, meaning it would have until late April 2012 to comply.

The company, now based in Palo Alto, could still retain a private ownership structure, but an IPO is the more probable scenario given Facebook will have to make many of the same disclosures of a publicly traded company anyway.

But Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, 26, has been in no hurry to take the company public, partly because he hoped to preserve a free-wheeling culture. Some analysts also think Zuckerberg, named Time magazine's person of the year for 2010, wanted to avoid the public limelight so he would have more time to mature as a leader.

To help keep the company private, Facebook sought and received an SEC exemption in 2008 that assured employees who received a class of stock wouldn't be counted toward the 500-shareholder barrier. The stock awarded those employees won't be issued until an IPO or sale of the company occurs, another factor that will pressure Zuckerberg to drop his resistance to an IPO. Zuckerberg owns about a 25 percent stake in Facebook.

Facebook spokesman Jonathan Thaw declined to comment Thursday.

Crossing the 500-shareholder barrier prompted Google to pursue its IPO in 2004 before the Internet search leader had turned six years old.

If Facebook follows a similar timeline as Google did, its IPO would probably occur during the summer of 2012.

Some of Facebook's financial information is being shared for the first time as part of the exclusive stock offering that Goldman Sachs put together in an effort to raise \$1.5 billion. The minimum investment in the fund is \$2 million, although some exceptions are being made for Goldman's own partners.

Some of the numbers emerging in the limited stock offering help explain why Goldman Sachs itself decided to ante up \$450 million for a less than 1 percent stake in Facebook earlier this week. The investment valued Facebook at \$50 billion, more than twice the current market value of Internet pioneer Yahoo Inc.

Through the first nine months of last year, Facebook earned \$355 million on revenue of \$1.2 billion, according to the person who reviewed the offering document. That 30 percent profit margin is in the same range as that enjoyed by Google, which posted net income of nearly \$6 billion on revenue of \$29.9 billion through the first nine months of 2010. Facebook produced a similar profit margin in 2009, too, with net income of \$220 million on revenue of \$777 million, according to the person who had seen the Goldman Sachs documents.

Like Google, Facebook is making most of its money so far by selling advertising. Facebook has emerged as a marketing magnet because it now has more than 500 million users worldwide, and the company knows a lot about them because its audience shares so much information about their interests on the website. More than 30 billion links, notes, photos and other types of content get posted on Facebook each month.

As impressive as Facebook's growth has been, just how much the business is worth remains a hotly debated topic.

The \$50 billion market value implied in Goldman Sachs' investment is 25 times higher than the \$2 billion in revenue that analysts believe the company had last year. Google, the Internet's biggest moneymaker so far, ended Thursday with a market value of \$196 billion, about seven times its annual revenue.

Finallyfast.com Maker To Refund Thousands in Spyware Case

The company whose late-night commercials promised to "make your computer run fast the way it's supposed to," will pay tens of thousands of dollars in fines and refunds to settle charges that it engaged in deceptive advertising.

In a settlement with the Washington State attorney general's office, Ascentive, best known for its FinallyFast.com Web site, will pay \$78,000 in penalties and offer \$17.90 refunds to thousands of its Washington State customers who purchased the company's PC cleanup products but did not use them.

At FinallyFast.com, PC users download software that tests their system for any performance bottlenecks and then offers to clean things up - for a fee. Consumers complained that the software didn't work as advertised and that Ascentive racked up charges without properly notifying customers.

According to Assistant Attorney General Jake Bernstein, the company was peddling scareware - software that always found severe problems no matter what the condition of the computer being scanned. "They basically crossed the line in terms of advertising to consumers," he said.

Bernstein's office has a list of complaints against Ascentive, which echo consumer grievances that can be found online.

In court documents, the Washington attorney general's office said that until March 2009, Ascentive's free scan software came with adware and endless, annoying pop-up warnings that exaggerated problems on the computer. "The free scan categorizes everything that it identifies as an 'error,'" the filings state.

Customers who wanted to cancel their subscriptions were forced through a cumbersome process and finally had to respond to an e-mail message before their accounts would actually be closed. The company has now agreed to fix the way it advertises and bills for its products, Bernstein said.

Ascentive sued Google in June 2009 after the search engine company began refusing to run advertisements for its products. It dropped the suit a month later, and Google is again running ads for Finallyfast.com.

Ascentive could not be reached for comment.

However, it looks like the company has made a lot of money. Ascentive claims there have been more than 20 million downloads of its free scans. In a YouTube video interview with Ascentive CEO Adam Schran, filmed on Richard Branson's Necker Island Caribbean resort, Schran describes how he's enjoying the money he's made with the company, "It's important to spoil yourself along the way," he says. "Treat yourself to trips to Necker Island or a local spa or massage. Whatever is fun."

Global Spam Levels Decline Dramatically

There has been a dramatic decrease in the amount of spam email sent worldwide recently. Data from security firm Symantec shows that spam levels

have been steadily dropping since August, with a sharp decline in December.

Symantec said that while 200 billion spam emails were being sent out daily in August, that number deflated to about 50 billion in December.

Most spam emails are sent via botnets. Rustock, the dominant spam bot last year, is almost inactive, compared to the amount of spam it was sending out months ago. Symantec said that since Dec. 25, spam coming from Rustock has comprised less than 0.5 percent of worldwide spam.

According to a BBC report, Rustock accounted for almost half (47 to 48 percent) of global spam at its peak.

Additionally, two other botnets have basically gone quiet. Since Dec. 28, Lethic has been inactive and Xarvester has been idle since Dec. 31.

"Whilst this is an excellent gift over the holiday season for anyone who regularly uses email, we would not expect the level of spam to stay this low for long," Mathew Nisbet, Symantec malware data analyst, said in a blog post. "As we saw after the closure of McColo in 2008, and following further takedown attempts in subsequent years, botnets rarely stay quiet for very long. Even if these three botnets don't come back soon, we would expect other botnets, even new ones, to pick up where they have left off - very soon."

The BBC said that these spammers could be organizing a new campaign. Because they are profit-driven, if the botnets aren't as lucrative as they'd like, they stop and regroup.

Spammers might have found a new niche sending out junk posts on Facebook and Twitter. Twitter suffered a spam attack last month via tweets that discussed the "acai berry." The attack was related a hack into Gawker's commenter password database, and Twitter encouraged users to change their passwords immediately.

Online Health Info Popular But Often Unchecked

The number of people looking for health information online is set to soar as workers return from holiday breaks, but few will check where the information comes from, according to an international survey on Tuesday.

A report by researchers at the London School of Economics (LSE) commissioned by the private healthcare firm Bupa said that with smartphones and tablet computers set to outsell personal computers by 2012, more health information is available online and there are more ways to access it than ever before.

The Bupa Health Pulse survey questioned more than 12,000 people in Australia, Brazil, Britain, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Mexico, Russia, Spain and the United States and found that 81 percent of those with internet access use it to search for advice about health, medicines or medical conditions.

Russians search for health advice the most on the internet, followed by China, India, Mexico and Brazil. The French search for online health information the least, according to the survey's findings.

It also found that 68 percent of those who have access have used the internet to look for information about specific medicines and nearly 4 in 10 use it to look for other patients' experiences of a condition.

"New technologies are helping more people around the world to find out more about their health and to make better informed decisions. However, people need to make sure that the information they find will make them better, not worse," said David McDaid, a senior research fellow at the LSE.

In Britain, where Bupa predicted there would be 40 million hits on health websites this week as people make New Year's resolutions after their Christmas break, experts warned that much online health content is unchecked and people would struggle to know what to trust.

The survey found that of the 73 percent of Britons who say they go online for health information, more than six in 10 look for information about medicines and more than half of them, or 58 percent, use the information to self diagnose.

Yet only a quarter of people say they check where their online advice has come from.

"Relying on dodgy information can easily lead to people taking risks with inappropriate tests and treatments, wasting money and causing unnecessary worry," said Annabel Bentley, a medical director at Bupa.

"Equally, people may check online and dismiss serious symptoms when they should get advice from a doctor."

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